

## Environmental license plates stuck in neutral; bad economy and small logos suspected

By Paul Rogers  
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[Would you pay for a specialized plate to help fund conservation programs?](#)

Maybe it's the bad economy, or the dinky designs. But two state campaigns aimed at raising money to expand parks, restore creeks and build hiking trails in the Bay Area and the Sierra Nevada through the sale of new specialized license plates are failing to gain traction with motorists.

Under state law, sponsors of commemorative license plates must sign up 7,500 prepaid orders in one year or the DMV won't produce the plates. The plates cost \$50 a year.

But a proposed plate that would feature a small image of the Golden Gate Bridge and whose proceeds would help Bay Area open space projects has sold only 455 copies, and faces a deadline of mid-July. A second proposed plate, which features a bear and a mountain, would fund projects of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency. It has sold only 256 copies, and faces a September deadline.

"We might have gotten a little bump from the holidays, but it has been really difficult," said Bob Kingman, a manager with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy who is overseeing its license plate campaign.

"You'd think getting 7,500 people to buy one would be easy. There are 28 million registered vehicles in California," he said. "But it's not."

Most states have specialized license plates that help pay for things from universities to parks. In the past decade, the 10 main specialized plates in California have together raised about \$25 million to \$30 million a year. The whale tail plate, for example,

helps fund beach cleanups and other programs run by the California Coastal Commission. Other plates fund state arts programs, veterans programs, Yosemite National Park projects and restoration around Lake Tahoe.

But with the bad economy, sales are crashing fast.

In 2008, California motorists purchased 82,230 specialized plates, a drop of 20 percent from the year before. And although the numbers aren't yet totaled for 2009, they show a continuing plunge, to 58,246 through Dec. 1.

"The economy and gas prices and the overall cost of operating your vehicle is higher than it has been in the past," said Jan Mendoza, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Motor Vehicles. "For a lot of people these days, specialized plates are a luxury."

The plates are not a luxury for many state agencies that work to preserve California's parks, beaches and lakes. They have emerged as a key source of funding, insulated from the year-to-year vagaries of the Legislature.

Now, not only are existing projects in Yosemite, Lake Tahoe and the coast in jeopardy as the public chooses not to renew the specialty plates, but efforts to carve out new revenue streams aren't getting off the ground.

The Golden Gate plate, for example, is sponsored by the California Coastal Conservancy, a state agency based in Oakland that builds trails, bathrooms and parking lots at beaches along the coast to provide public access. The idea was to raise as much as \$1 million a year with a specialty plate, said Amy Hutzel, a program manager for the agency, but now, unless more orders come in, it may pull the plug on the effort.

"We have to get 1,000 a month now," she said. "We're going to see how it goes over the next couple of months and see whether to continue it to July. If somebody wants to see this happen, they need to sign up now."

Further complicating efforts is a new state law, signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2006, that limits the size of the art work on the plates. Prompted by concerns from the California Highway Patrol that officers were having a hard time reading the license plate numbers, the law required that any logo be no larger than two inches by three inches — about the size of a business card.

"Some people are upset. They say why don't you have a bigger design on the plate?" said Kingman. "They see the other plates out there and say, 'Why didn't you get a bigger image like the Tahoe plate or the whale tail plate?' I tell them we would love to have a big plate, but we have to stick to current law."

Since state agencies can't use public money to market the plates, they need donations from private groups and corporations. Those funds also have been slow to come in this economy. Many motorists haven't even heard of the new plates.

On Monday, several motorists in San Jose summed up the problem when shown the designs of the pending plates.






"You can barely see it. It's like what's the point? You are paying \$50 for something that's pretty hard to see," said Brandon Clarke of Los Gatos, looking at a life-size photo of the proposed Golden Gate plate.

Added Rob Tedrick of Santa Cruz: "When you see the whale tail, you know what it is. Anyway, the economy is too tough. It costs so much to register my truck already."

Go to [www.sierralicenseplate.org](http://www.sierralicenseplate.org)

## Top specialized license plates

California issues special interest license plates to help raise money for projects. Among the most popular:

		Year issued	Total plates issued	Total amount raised (in millions)	Number currently registered
	Whale tail	1997	166,686	\$29.6	99,314
	Arts council	1994	160,493	\$44.9	76,933
	Yosemite	1993	107,928	\$47.9	54,342
	Lake Tahoe	1996	61,188	\$22.0	35,649
	Memorial	2002	43,001	\$13.3	26,676
	Kids	1994	209,496	\$43.3	26,504
	Veterans	1995	44,889	\$8.3	25,346
	Firefighters	1995	32,436	\$9.4	24,242
	UCLA	1993	4,957	\$2.3	2,557
<b>Total:</b>			<b>831,074</b>	<b>\$221 million</b>	<b>371,563</b>

\*Since inception. Figures as of Dec. 1, 2009

Source: Department of Motor Vehicles

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